



China Perspectives

2016/1 | 2016

Photo Essay: Deng Xiaoping's Failed Reform in
1975-1976

Wenjing Guo, *Internet entre État-parti et société civile en Chine* (The Internet between the Party-State and Civil Society in China),

Paris, L'Harmattan, 2015, 329 pp.

Nicole Khouri

Translator: N. Jayaram



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/6934>

DOI: 10.4000/chinaperspectives.6934

ISSN: 1996-4617

Publisher

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 March 2016

Number of pages: 65-66

ISSN: 2070-3449

Electronic reference

Nicole Khouri, « Wenjing Guo, *Internet entre État-parti et société civile en Chine* (The Internet between the Party-State and Civil Society in China), », *China Perspectives* [Online], 2016/1 | 2016, Online since 01 March 2016, connection on 23 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/6934> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.6934>

their power. Stalin, the realist, brought a cold and methodical cruelty to the eradication of all his opponents, current or potential. Mao practised a more detached cruelty. He was also less capable and no doubt less keen on guiding his country towards the path of economic development, the initial aim of the revolution he led.

While Bianco refuses to let history be held hostage by ideology, he does not adhere to a fragmentary, meticulous approach that graces current historic research. He grapples with the vast scenarios and major problems that were the subject of confrontations among previous generations: he approaches them without theoretical a priori, armed only with his deep knowledge of facts. This pragmatic approach could be labelled scientific if it had kept the author from offering a conclusion. But that is not the case, and his conclusions will rub quite a few readers the wrong way.

No, contrary to the claims of partisans disappointed by communism who sought refuge in Maoism, there was nothing original in the Chinese path. The regime founded by Mao had a fraternal resemblance to the Soviet regime, although not that of twins (p. 119). The Chinese revolution was only a "recurrence," repeating the error and the crime of the Russian one. Neither revolution attained the proclaimed aims of social justice and economic modernisation.

This negative judgement will shock the nostalgic, who can only challenge it with their faith in the Great Stalin and the Little Red Book. So be it. But will historians agree? It is no doubt in the last chapter, entitled "The Monsters," that Bianco goes the farthest. His absolute condemnation of Mao may not be acceptable to those who see the Great Helmsman's murderous utopia as more than a manipulation, and rather as reflecting a sincere revolutionary elan leading to salutary understandings and questionings. Those who want to accord Mao the benefit of the doubt (this reviewer is not among them) will certainly have difficulty coming up with facts capable of puncturing Bianco's punctilious argumentation. But then, is the author right in concluding, citing the failure of the two revolutions, that no revolution is capable of remedying the ills of the world? "Reformism," he avers, "is what works best." Subject to a test as exacting as that *Recurrence* imposes on the Russian and Chinese revolutions, can reformism really emerge "*magna cum laude*"?

This quick overview can hardly do justice to the science and humanity of a work made all the more pleasurable by its elegant and familiar style. There is no doubt that this book belongs in the historiography of the twentieth century and should long serve as a reference text for specialists. It should also appeal to larger intellectual circles, offering in an erudite and accessible manner the history of countries that globalisation has suddenly rendered close, and a history too often held hostage by ideology or simply ignored.

■ Translated by N. Jayaram.

■ Marie-Claire Bergère is professor emeritus at the Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales (INALCO), Paris (bergere.feugeas@gmail.com).



Wenjing Guo,
Internet entre État-parti et
société civile en Chine (The
Internet between the Party-
State and Civil Society in China),
Paris, L'Harmattan, 2015, 329 pp.

NICOLE KHOURI

Wenjing Guo belongs to the so-called post-1980 generation, that of young Internet users on whom she focused a PhD thesis in socio-anthropology defended in October 2014: *Internet à Canton (Chine), Dynamiques sociales et politiques* (Internet in Guangzhou, China: Social and Political Dynamics), University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, and upon which this work is based.

The book is composed of two parts, one mainly devoted on the Internet in China (1994-2014) and the other to Internet usage based on three case studies undertaken in Guangzhou: a group of homosexuals formed around a "model mother" whose blog brought together thousands of Internet users, a residents' group mobilised against the construction of a waste incinerator, and an association of Internet users defending Cantonese language and culture: the tangible and intangible heritage of the city and the province. These two parts contain valuable methodological considerations. An overly short six-page conclusion follows.

Part 1 offers a synthesis of existing work and traces the Internet's evolution in China between 1994 and 2008, the latter year marking the passage from a regime marked by the government's sole responsibility for control to a governance logic by which entrepreneurs and Internet users are vested with responsibility for observing the norms laid down by the Party-state. This new governance also sought to ensure the participation of cadres and Party officials through the creation of blogs, in order to paint a benevolent image of the leadership. It took shape in the context of the "Harmonious Society" slogan put forward in 2002, evolving by 2008 towards the elaboration of a social reform. Like some other cities, Guangzhou constituted a pioneering laboratory where the notion of *gongyi* (public interest, public welfare) entails the commitment of ordinary people in resolving social problems. But 2008 also marked a turning point in the hardening of Internet censorship because of the rapid spread of news about incidents and mobilisations linked to ethnic confrontations (Tibet and Xinjiang), farmers' protests, or even major scandals ("bean curd schools," contaminated milk powder...).

The period between 2009 and 2014, the subject of the author's synthesis, saw the emergence of the incubator Yi Fu, founded in 2006 and analysed as an exemplary case of the market's insertion into social matters, largely borrowing from global models of venture philanthropy and corporate social responsibility. It led to a logic that, choosing among local grass roots initiatives, brings "acceptable" ones into a process of institutionalisation via fiscalisation and professionalisation through performance. Both Internet users and "social organisations" were asked by the government to take part in managing society online and offline.

Part 2 of the book focuses on the subsequent 2010-2012 period, looking at three groups of Internet users, "ordinary" actors belonging mainly to the post-1980 generation, invested in social and political relations reconstituted on the terrain of activism, both before and during the institutionalisation of struggles. A socio-anthropological approach guides the author's analysis here.

"Mama Shang" lies at the root of the first group studied. In 2008, the mother of a homosexual created a blog, a space for global communication that helped numerous homosexuals and lesbians to act individually and/or collectively. Then came the founding of PFLAG (Federation of Parents, Friends and Families of Lesbians and Gays), which, finding no acceptance in the existing framework of legitimate social organisations, joined associations engaged in anti-AIDS campaigns that enjoyed the backing of the government and international funding. In 2012, there was a robust debate between the mother and the co-founder, who enlarged the battlefronts over discrimination against homosexuals to include the right to marriage and made contact with similar causes linked to gender issues such as the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) network. "Mama Shang" considered this enlargement risky, as the blog had to preserve its apolitical appearance, a private and familial dimension protecting it from political attacks.

The second group studied is one of Internet users and proprietors living in a condominium, Jardinaqua, situated near Panyu, who mobilised against the construction of a nearby waste incinerator, which was scheduled to open in 2009. For these urban middle class youths, the Internet played a crucial role in researching technical and scientific information regarding pollution caused by such units. Faced with local entities, a coalition of interests among officials and a state enterprise tasked with the work, they experimented with a sort of grassroots democracy that strengthened their group identity. National and international reverberations from this mobilisation obliged the Panyu authorities to suspend the project during the preparations for the 2010 Asian Games in Guangzhou. A small group devoted to the environmental cause founded the "Green Family" in 2010, focusing on the issue of recyclable waste. Some activists regrouped a year later in Eco City, which was more responsive to their concerns over effectiveness and expansion of the struggle to other citizen and philanthropic fronts. They saw themselves as awakers of conscience, consultants, and mediators for co-operation between the authorities and citizens. Eco City typifies an NGO that marries personal conviction and responsibility with the idea of *gongyi* put forward by the government in its "Harmonious Society" version. The experience of Alon – a pseudonym used by the author – exemplifies a social actor who maintains the tension between basic freedom of expression and control by public authorities, equally agile in avoiding the trap of benevolent activism when taking on a professional form inside new "social organisations."

The third group analysed consists of micro groups of Internet users or activists who came together over the G106 site (2008) and Lingliao (2010). Their actions were reminiscent of those of the Cantonese Association established in 2004, and through the website of which (the Cantonese diaspora obliging!) all sorts of action proposals were put online on a global scale and acted upon to stem the decline of Cantonese language in the face of the imposition of Mandarin in national education. Guangzhou's urban renewal programme and the demolition of its old quarters begun about a decade earlier, along with a proposal by the Guangdong Provincial People's Consultative Conference in 2010 to reduce the amount of Cantonese broadcasting on television, revived the debates both online and in the local press,

leading to a number of protests for the defence of Cantonese language and culture. Conserve what, for whom, and how? From 2008-09, young educated urbanites organised guided visits to areas earmarked for demolition, held Cantonese language classes, produced documentaries and organised photo exhibitions, recorded the memoirs of the last inhabitants, and presented evaluation dossiers on urban planning. These actions linked to their rehabilitation projects for old quarters helped with their application for NGO status. They were in step with the national and international eco-tourism market, and with NGOs gaining government authorisation and en-joined by UNESCO to preserve tangible and intangible heritage. And what of the quarters' inhabitants, left in the lurch and considered to be only aspiring to a higher payoff in order to vacate?

Through these three micro-groups the author has deliberately implicated the Internet in social relations, and the nature of her investigation is situated on a point farthest from an analysis built on a cross-section of opinions or themes raised by and on the Internet.

This book's interest resides entirely in the way it never sees Internet users or actors as effects of situations, even though the behaviour of those in authority strongly determines their conduct. It is by taking into account their aims and demands and the proposals of those taking part in collective action, as well as their expectations, that the socio-anthropological approach restores the voice of a civil society that is being experienced through what everyone lives and says at the crossroads of professional, affective, and activist relations.

Given this triple dimension, these young urbanites' activism fully qualifies as the kind of new social movements in post-modern societies analysed by Alain Touraine.

The Chinese young post-1980 generation has made massive use of the Internet and social networks, which have boosted their visibility and the expression of their rights, indignation, and mobilisations for a civil society in its infancy. They have experimented with a space of virtual autonomy, however limited, fully aware of the relative effectiveness of the Chinese government's control methods in respect of information circulation, and have aligned themselves more strongly with a world whose so-called global norms (cultural and financial) are a source of inspiration as well as of disquiet.

■ Translated by N. Jayaram.

■ Nicole Khouri is a sociologist and associate researcher at IMAF (Institute of African Worlds), UMR 8171, Paris, and at CEaA (Centre for Studies on Africa, Asia and Latin America), University of Lisbon, Portugal (khouri.n@wanadoo.fr).